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Biden celebrates St Patrick's Day with Irish PM Varadkar

Some 32 million Americans, almost 10 percent claim ancestral roots in Ireland

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden and Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar painted the town green Friday, celebrating Saint Patrick's Day and touting Biden's expected visit to Ireland and Northern Ireland for the anniversary of the Good Friday peace accords.

The Taoiseach's annual White House visit is a cherished tradition on the Irish national holiday, that has never been more true than under Biden, who frequently trumpets his family roots in Ireland and sprinkles quotes from Irish poems through his speeches.

In front of a fire in the Oval Office, Biden, sporting a sprig of shamrock in his lapel, said Saint Patrick's is a "big day" in his house. Varadkar, also wearing shamrock, highlighted recent US assistance in torturous negotiations over trade rules between post-Brexit Britain and its Northern Irish province and the Republic of Ireland, which is in the European Union.

The arrangement, known as the Windsor Framework, is an "agreement that lasts," Varadkar said, "which is important for Northern Ireland, and also important for British-Irish and European relations." He promised Biden a good time on his coming visit, expected to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the US-brokered Good Friday Agreement, which ended the violent unrest known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

"We're going to roll out the red carpet and it's going to be a visit like no other. Everyone's excited about it already. We're going to have great crowds who would love to see you," he said. Varadkar's day started at breakfast with Vice President Kamala Harris, where "eggs Saint Patrick" were on the menu. Varadkar and Biden then left for lunch at the US Capitol, hosted by Republican speaker of the House, Kevin McCarthy.

Later at the White House, where the fountains were

tinted green for the day, Varadkar presented Biden with the traditional bowl of shamrock-sprigs of clover representing Ireland. Entertaining the revelers was Irish pop star Niall Horan, a former member of mega boy band One Direction, now a singer-songwriter.

'Can't take for granted'

Some 32 million Americans—almost 10 percent—claim ancestral roots in Ireland. Given the long history, the fates of the country and troubled northern province play outsized roles in US politics. Biden—who attended an event in California with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak this Monday—said he intends to visit both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. This is expected to happen some time around the Good Friday Agreement anniversary date, April 10.

At the shamrock ceremony Friday, Biden said that "even after nearly 25 years we can't take for granted a shared future built on peace in Northern Ireland." "I want each of you to know that the United States will remain a strong friend and partner," he said.

Varadkar responded that the historic accord "could never have been achieved without the steadfast support and commitment of President Biden and so many others" in Washington. Expectations have been that Biden was waiting for the British-EU trade dispute to be completely resolved before he planned the visit. While that is now to be in place, there are still wrinkles.

The head of the biggest pro-British Northern Irish party, the DUP, said Tuesday it would not rush on deciding whether to endorse the Windsor Framework. "Whether the president visits or not, I have no arbitrary deadline here," DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson said on a visit of his own to Washington.



WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden hosts Irish PM Taoiseach Leo Varadkar for a Shamrock presentation and reception in the East Room of the White House in Washington, DC, on March 17, 2023. — AFP

If the post-Brexit trade arrangement does get full backing from rival forces in Northern Ireland, that could pave the way for restarting a local power-sharing agreement between pro-British loyalists and the nationalist parties, which want to break away and reunite the province with the Republic of Ireland. Asked

if there was a timeframe in place for Biden's visit, Varadkar told reporters: "Not at this moment." In an indication of the close US involvement in the Irish political puzzle, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met Thursday at the White House with both Donaldson and leaders of the nationalist Sinn Fein party. — AFP

Greece sacks police chief after train tragedy protests

ATHENS: Greece said Saturday it had sacked its national police chief, days after clashes between security forces and demonstrators broke out in the wake of the country's deadliest train tragedy. The Prime Minister's office said police chief Constantinos Skoumas had been discharged less than two months after being confirmed at the post.

No specific cause was given for prompting the change, which comes as police face widespread public criticism for their handling of protests over the February 28 tragedy in which 57 people were killed when two trains collided. "The appointment of a new police chief aims (to introduce) a more positive and efficient implementation of modern police operational plans on citizen safety," the PM's office said. In the latest protest on Thursday, a riot police squad was filmed charging and striking peaceful demonstrators at the central Syntagma Square in Athens.

A police tow truck was also filmed ramming a group of demonstrators trying to block an Athens street with garbage bins, sending one demonstrator flying to the ground. The train disaster has sparked weeks of angry and occasionally violent protests, and has piled major pressure on the conservative government of Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis ahead of elections expected in May.

EU assistance

Most of the victims were students returning from a long holiday weekend. "We will learn from our mistakes," Mitsotakis said during a campaign



ATHENS: Protesters take part in a demonstration against the government and to voice outrage at the February 28, 2023, train disaster during a 24-hour strike, in Athens on March 16, 2023. Greek police fired tear gas and protesters hurled firebombs on March 16, 2023, as more than 40,000 people took to the streets. — AFP

stop in Athens on Saturday. "A mistake becomes a fault only if it is repeated." Greece's transport minister resigned after the disaster, and the stationmaster on duty during the accident and three other railway officials have been charged and face a possible life sentence. But railway unions had long been warning about problems, claiming the network was underfunded, understaffed and accident-prone after a decade of spending cuts.

Acting Transport Minister Georgios Gerapetritis has said rail services—which were suspended after

the accident—would gradually resume from March 22. But safety concerns remain high. Gerapetritis and former transport ministers will appear before a parliamentary committee on March 20 to answer lawmakers' questions on the tragedy.

The minister on Saturday said he would then travel to Brussels during the week for talks with EU officials on "technical assistance" to improve safety. Train services will be fully restored before April 16, and the government aims to introduce automated safety systems by the end of September, he said. — AFP

UK Tories could pull off shock election win

LONDON: Tony Blair came to power as leader of Britain's Labour party in the years after it suffered a paralysing defeat to the Conservatives that few saw coming. While praising current Labour chief Keir Starmer, Blair says that in the next general election, a shock win cannot be ruled out for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Tories—even if the party currently trails badly in the polls.

But on one thing regarding UK politics, the 69-year-old elder statesman is sure: Britain will not rejoin the European Union in the coming years. "Whether and how the UK rejoins the EU will be for a future generation. I think that's the reality," Blair said in an interview with AFP and fellow European news agencies ANSA, DPA and EFE.

The former prime minister vocally opposed Brexit in Britain's 2016 referendum, even travelling to Northern Ireland with ex-Tory leader John Major to warn of its likely impact on the delicate peace there.

Following his surprise win over Labour in 1992, Major laid the foundations of peace talks with pro-Irish militants, which Blair went on to build into a landmark agreement in 1998. Major's election win accelerated Labour's conversion from a flirtation with the far-left in the 1980s to electoral respectability, and Blair won a landslide five years later.

Then, the Conservatives were rebuilding after the political demise of Margaret Thatcher. Today, under Sunak, they are trying to rebuild after political and economic tumult under Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Starmer's Labour has a commanding lead in opinion polls, averaging 20 points, ahead of the next election likely to take place in 2024. But Sunak personally polls better than his rival, drawing media comparisons to the 1992 contest between Major and his Labour opponent, Neil Kinnock, who voters decided was not ready to be prime minister.

'Very sensible guy'

Asked if Sunak could pull off a repeat upset, Blair said: "In politics, you should never talk of certainties, because there aren't any." Sunak, whose presentational style has been compared to Blair, was "repairing the damage that has been done" to the Conservative brand by Johnson and Truss, he said.

But however much Sunak improves the party's standing, voters will still be taxed higher and receiving less in public services come the next election. "And I also think that Keir is a very sensible guy. He's someone who looks like he can lead the country," Blair added. "In the immortal words of Sir Rod Stewart, it's time to give the other lot a go, or whatever he said." The British rock crooner, a lifelong Conservative, said in January that "I've never seen it so bad... change the bloody government" and let Labour in.

While both Blair and Starmer campaigned to keep Britain in the EU, the current Labour leader has ruled out rejoining the bloc's single market as a compromise step after Brexit. "I think right now, the debate in the UK is the degree to which we want to re-establish a strong relationship with Europe, which I think we should and which I believe Labour will also do," Blair said.

Britain and the EU had much to talk about in energy and climate, science and research, and defence and security after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, he said. "I think there's a strong case for trying to cooperate on technology," Blair added. — AFP

Mexico prez calls big rally with polls on horizon

MEXICO CITY: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has called for a big political rally in Mexico City on Saturday aimed at energizing his supporters ahead of key elections next year. The gathering is seen as the left-wing populist's riposte to opponents of a controversial new election law that he promoted.

The rally is Lopez Obrador's "response to the opposition coming out to protest against his electoral reform," political analyst Jose Antonio Crespo told AFP. Tens of thousands of Mexicans demonstrated on February 26 against a new law reducing the size and budget of the National Electoral Institute (INE), the independent body that oversees elections.

Critics see the changes—which were approved by the ruling party-controlled Congress last month—as an attack on democracy ahead of the 2024 presidential election. Mexican presidents are barred from serving more than one six-year term, and Lopez Obrador has ruled out trying to change the constitution to stay in office.

Even so, he is keen to see his Morena party hold onto power after he stands aside. Lopez Obrador, who enjoys an approval rating of around 60 percent, has called Saturday's rally to coincide with the 85th anniversary of the nationalization of Mexican oil.

"We have to reaffirm our independence, our sov-



MEXICO CITY: File photo shows, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador delivers remarks at the end of the 10th North American Leaders' Summit at the National Palace in Mexico City. — AFP

ereignty," said the 69-year-old leader, whose nationalist energy policies have unsettled foreign governments and investors. Political columnist Hernan Gomez Bruera described the electoral reform and oil expropriation anniversary as a "pretext" for the president to mobilize his supporters.

The rally is due to start at 5 pm (2300 GMT) and Lopez Obrador is expected to address the crowds in Mexico City's main square from the National Palace. A similar rally in November drew hundreds of thousands of Lopez Obrador's supporters into the streets of Mexico City, two weeks after an earlier protest against his electoral reforms.

Lopez Obrador alleges that the INE endorsed fraud when he ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 2006 and 2012, before winning in 2018. — AFP

Iran sentences two over Shiraz shrine attack

TEHRAN: An Iranian court sentenced two people to death over an October attack on a shrine in the southern city of Shiraz that cost over a dozen lives, the judiciary said Saturday. The pair were convicted of assisting in "corruption on earth, armed rebellion and acting against national security", the judiciary's Mizan Online website reported, citing Kazem Mousavi, the chief justice of Fars province.

Mousavi said they "were directly involved in the arming, procurement, logistics and guidance of the main perpetrator of the terrorist attack" on the Shah Cheraagh mausoleum on October 26 that killed 13 people and wounded 30 others. Three other defendants in the case were sentenced to prison for five, 15 and 25 years for being members of the Sunni Muslim extremist Islamic State (IS) group, he said. The verdicts against the five could be appealed before the supreme court, he added. The main perpetrator of the attack, identified by media outlets in Iran as Hamed Badakhshan, died of injuries suffered during his arrest, Mizan said. — AFP